



GOD'S WORK, OUR HANDS
Exploring God's Work Among Us

**Sermon Preached by
Bishop Samuel R. Zeiser**

June 6, 2009

**2009 Synod Assembly
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod**

Texts: Isaiah 5:15-24; John 15:18-20, 26-28

God's work. Our hands.

That's the tag line of the ELCA since last October. You'll read those words when you see this church's symbol.

The phrase is meant to open doors for conversation about faith active in service for the life of the world. That's the official explanation. I looked it up.

I looked it up because of something in the Isaiah reading. By the way, did you pick up that Isaiah's not in a particularly good mood in chapter 5? He is about to take on a spiritual crisis of extraordinary proportions in the land of Judah, home to the city of Jerusalem. *People are bowed down, everyone is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are humbled* [v.15]. A decadent aristocracy set the stage for widespread greed, hypocrisy, self-indulgence, and injustices. One commentator used the word "deplorable" to describe the moral condition in the land.

Five verses follow, meant to lay out the dimensions of the deplorable state of affairs. Here's a summary: *Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who are wise in your own eyes, who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights.* You get the point. There is one indictment against Judah, however, that captured my imagination – my literary imagination, that is. It's the first: *Ah, you who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood, who drag sin along as with cart ropes* [v18]. Such an eloquent put-down. If I'm ever to be humiliated, disparaged, or ridiculed, I want it to sound like that.



Ah, you who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood, who drag sin along as with cart ropes. It is an articulate condensed version of Isaiah's lengthy diatribe. But peel away the layers of eloquence with me. You begin to discover the image of hands drawing with all their might the weight of iniquity, straining and scarlet as they clasp tightly cart rope in order to drag sin's tonnage. Look at your hands, and imagine them holding a tug-of-war rope. The rope is taut, moving a fraction of an inch one way, then a fraction of an inch the other way. Stinging and heat erupt incessantly with each fraction of movement. Pride ignites yet more willingness to sustain the burning. Your side will win this pointless endeavor!

Don't get me wrong. A tug-of-war is not iniquitous or sinful. But Isaiah's eloquence does its part to signal what happens to hands and to spirits that drag and draw, drag and draw the clumsy, ponderous burdens of life that cause us to trip over one another and fall helplessly. The way we trip over one another and fall helpless when racism draws us and drags us. The way we trip over one another and fall helpless when cultural tugs-of-war pull us apart. The way we trip over one another and fall helpless when conflict-ridden issues tear at our unity. Sure, one side may seem victorious at the falling of the other, but both sides struggle to relieve the same pain in their hands.



Isaiah confronts those Judean hands stinging for the tugging they do against the intentions of God. And Isaiah is just getting up a head of rhetorical steam. The first chapters documenting his rage orient us to the prophet's background, his call, his theological perspective. Through chapter 39 anyway, you observe Isaiah pass judgment, using a simple criterion: God's holiness/Judah's sinfulness. There is not a lot of room for maneuvering. Isaiah's counsel: trust the Holy One of Israel who established the covenant with you. *The Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness. Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture, fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins* [vv 16,17].

Isaiah convicts those with stinging hands, and yet implores them to purposes of justice and righteousness. You know that Isaiah's was not the only or the last of God's prophetic voices to call the people to repentance. The futility of all the prophets' efforts is almost too painful, too stinging, to recall. So then, can such stinging hands do God's work?

Thanks be to God, we can look to Jesus' stinging hands for assurance. Pulled one way by the duplicity of Pontius Pilate and another way by the obstinacy of the religious leaders; pulled one way by the avaricious merchants in the Temple and another way by the solemn observance of Passover; pulled one way by the unruly Roman soldiers who beat him and another way by the compliant Simon of Cyrene who carried his cross, Jesus knew the tugging and pulling of the sin and the iniquity until the stinging nails pierced his hands and the heat erupted with each strike of the hammer.

Now with stinging hands constrained to a cross Jesus begins to accomplish the crowning, compelling, saving work of God. It is a saving work that overpowers the power of self-indulgence, hypocrisy, racism, conflict. It is indeed a deed that puts to death the sting of death. It is the saving act of the Christ that insists that God comes to us in the face of the pain and suffering of the world, in the face of the waywardness and strife of the believer in order to bring



new life to the hands stinging, to the hearts stinging, to the faith stinging. Those attempts to make our way to God, they are now not only futile, but also an offense to the crucifixion of Jesus. God acted decisively to win us.

The flood of grace in that font proclaims with Isaiac conviction and eloquence that we can claim the Christ's victory everyday. Immerse your hand in that flood and, as the stinging of your sin is taken away, trace on your forehead the cross that marks the condemnation of the sting's power in Jesus. God's work. Your hands. When you receive the bread of life in your hands shortly, let the AMEN you say in response reflect the joyous freedom from sin's bondage you are given.



God's work. Your hands. In thanksgiving for this new life, we are free to respond with justice and righteousness toward one another in this assembly and toward our neighbors in the world.

What do you say, Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod? Are we prepared, as God's people baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to trust the gift (God's work) and share it (our hands)?

John records Jesus saying, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" [v 26]. God's work.

He goes on, "You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning" [v 27]. Our hands.

Are we prepared to let go of the cords and the ropes? Are we prepared to exalt justice and righteousness? If our answer is yes, then the Lord of the Church is prepared to use this synod in ways that will allow all to see "the lambs graze as in their pasture, and the fatlings and kids feeding among the ruins."

Let it be, Lord. Let it be!

